

John Mercer Langston House  
207 East College Street  
Oberlin  
Lorain County  
Ohio

HABS No. OH-2226

2226  
OHIO,  
47-0328,  
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

JOHN MERCER LANGSTON HOUSE

HABS No. OH-2226

Location: 207 East College Street, Oberlin, Lorain County, Ohio

Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:  
17.398690.4571620

Present Owner  
and Occupant: Earl L. Bliss

Present Use: residence

Significance: John Mercer Langston, the first known black elected official in the United States and the first black member of Congress from Virginia, lived here from 1856-1867. It is the only remaining residence connected with him.

## PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History:

1. Date of construction: 1855
2. Alterations and additions: The original two wings have been augmented with a small brick shed and screened porch on the rear and a small two-story bathroom wing on the west side. Sometime after 1929 the original Gothic revival porch was replaced. The chimney near the front door is of recent construction.

- B. Historical Context: Born in Louisa County, Virginia on December 14, 1829, John Mercer Langston was the son of Ralph Quarles, a white plantation owner, and Lucy Langston, a slave of African and Native American ancestry. After both parents died in 1843, John was sent to Ohio under the guardianship of a family friend, Colonel William D. Gooch of Chillicothe, Ohio, in accordance with his father's wishes. Living as a member of the Gooch family, John remained with them until the age of ten when they decided to move to Missouri, a slave state.

Although Gooch's decision was apparently well-intentioned, the young black boy's future in such a state would have been extremely precarious. While the family was enroute to its new home, John's half brother William, a carpenter and joiner in Chillicothe, overtook the Gooches and declared that they had no right to remove the boy from the jurisdiction of the court that supervised his guardianship. Formal court proceedings later upheld that contention, and John was placed in the care of Richard Long, the abolitionist minister of a Presbyterian Church in Chillicothe. After remaining with Long for

three years, John was sent to Cincinnati to a private school where he stayed for two years. In 1844, Langston entered the preparatory department at Oberlin. He graduated in 1849 and continued at Oberlin, taking the theological course. His real interest, however, was in law but he was not accepted to law schools because of his race. He elected to read law privately with Philemon Bliss of Elyria, Ohio. In September 1854 he passed the bar and was admitted to practice. The following month he married Carolina Wall in Oberlin and they lived on a farm Langston had bought in Brownhelm, Ohio.

Langston built up a successful law practice in Brownhelm where most of his clients were white Democrats. After establishing voting residence there, he ran for the office of township clerk on the Liberty ticket in March of 1855. He won that race in April, thereby becoming the first known black elected official in the United States.

Langston remained in Brownhelm until the spring of 1856 when he decided to move to Oberlin, a town he believed offered him greater opportunities for the advancement of his law practice. This proved to be true, and his political career was furthered as well. He was elected clerk of Russia township and, in 1857, to the City Council, where he served until 1860 when he was elected to the Board of Education. While on the Board of Education he also served as a recruiter of black troops of the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Regiments.

In 1868, Langston left Oberlin to fulfill an appointment as Inspector General of Education and Abandoned Lands for the Freedmen's Bureau in Washington, D.C. He did not remain in that capacity for very long as General O.O. Howard soon asked him to organize the Law Department of Howard University. The department was established in January 1869 with Langston as dean. When General Howard resigned from his position as president of the university in 1873, Langston was appointed vice-president and assumed the duties of acting president until 1875 when he left Howard.

Langston's activities in Washington were not limited to his work at Howard. Appointed by President Grant to the District's Board of Health in 1871, he served as legal counsel to that group. In 1877 President Hayes appointed him resident minister to Haiti and charge d'affaires to Santo Domingo. He remained in diplomatic service until 1885 when the Democratic Party came into power. Although President Cleveland asked him to continue in the foreign service, Langston did not feel he could conscientiously support a Democratic administration.

Upon his return to the United States that same year, Langston became the first president of the recently organized Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now Virginia State College) in Petersburg. He remained in that position until his broader political interests necessitated his departure so that he could run on the Republican

ticket for Congress in 1888. The campaign was very difficult and his victory so bitterly opposed that he was unable to assume his seat until September 1890. He was only able to serve until March 1891 when his re-election campaign proved unsuccessful. He retired to his home in Washington and worked on his autobiography, From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capital. John Mercer Langston died at his home on November 15, 1897.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. General Statement: This simple, pleasant vernacular house is in good condition.
- B. Description of Exterior:
  - 1. Walls: clapboard
  - 2. Porch: A long porch covers almost all of the front first story.
  - 3. Chimneys: There are two brick chimneys, one in the front center and one on the east end.
  - 4. Doors: The quatrefoil carvings on the front door are Gothic revival in character.
- C. Description of Interior: Entry to the house is through a central hall that contains a stairway. Front sitting rooms flanking the hall are spacious and have large French windows. In these rooms the original baseboards, chair rails, and door and window trims remain. The west sitting room appears to have its original plaster ceiling with a beaded motif.

## PART III. SOURCE OF INFORMATION

Langston, John Mercer. National Historic Landmark nomination form, 1974.

Prepared by: Holly K. Chamberlain  
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